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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, AI AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: THE INFLUENCE OF INFLUENCERS

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Abstract: *The goal of the paper is to conduct a comprehensive secondary research study to analyze the interplay between digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), influencers, and consumer behavior. Through the synthesis of existing literature and data from relevant sources, the study examines how influencers leverage digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to influence consumer preferences and purchasing decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the reliance on influencers as consumers increasingly shift to online shopping and trust recommendations from their favorite digital personalities. Results show that AI tools play a pivotal role in enhancing influencer effectiveness by enabling personalized content creation and leveraging data-driven insights to optimize engagement and conversion rates for brands. Additionally, the emergence of AI-generated virtual influencers marks a notable trend in expanding the influence landscape. Secondary research underscores the transformative impact of digital technologies and AI on reshaping consumer*

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behavior and marketing strategies. To conclude, it could be said that brands can achieve higher returns on investment (ROI) by harnessing the synergy between influencers and AI-driven analytics. This study provides a robust understanding of how these elements intersect, offering valuable insights into navigating the evolving landscape of digital marketing.

Keywords: *digital technologies, AI, influencers, influencer marketing, consumer behavior, social media marketing, virtual influencers, generational cohorts, personalized content, data-driven insights.*

INTRODUCTION

In modern marketing, particularly social media marketing, influencers play an exceptional role. Although the concept of influencers is not new, evolving consumer needs and behaviors, especially during the pandemic, have increased their significance. In the conditions in which companies were faced with labor shortages, poor logistics, and global economic changes, it is logical that they increasingly turned to influencers, giving them an advantage over traditional marketing tools.

On the other side, consumers are increasingly opting for online shopping and often opting for what they have seen on various social networks. On these platforms, consumers follow influencers who attract their attention with their knowledge, skills, beauty, photos, videos, and similar attributes. Through following, they build relationships based on trust and affinity.

With the emergence of TikTok as a new social application, with over 1 billion active users worldwide, companies began to build their strategies based on influencer marketing. In the era of high competition, gaining attention on social networks has become increasingly difficult, especially for small and medium-sized companies. Many companies struggled to adapt to this approach. Consequently, it is not surprising that companies are setting a budget for

influencer marketing, and according to the Influencer Marketing Hub report, that number is expected to reach $24 billion by the end of 2024.

Supporting the notion that influencer marketing is becoming extremely popular as a key marketing channel that marketers can use as part of their strategies, a 2023 HubSpot report indicates that 25% of marketers collaborate with influencers to promote products and services, making it a more popular marketing channel than virtual events, webinars and social commerce (HubSpot, 2023).

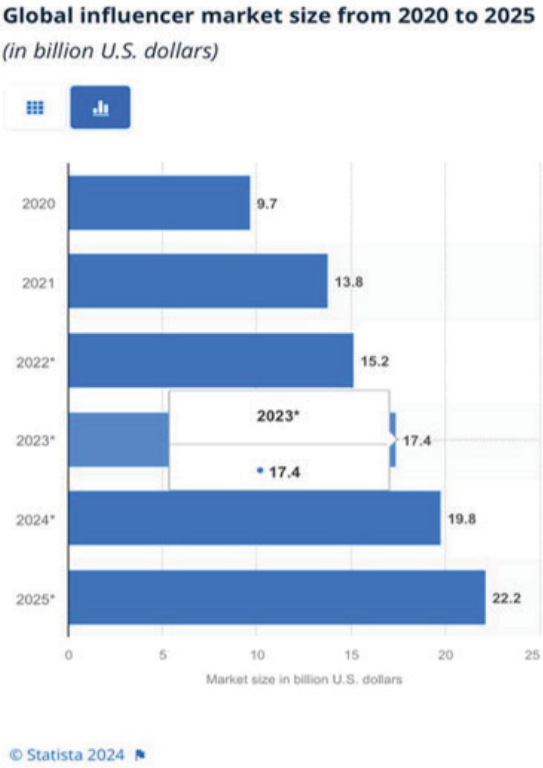

Image 1: Influencer marketing market size worldwide from 2016 to 2024 (in billion U.S. dollars), available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/1092819/global-influencer-market-size/.

According to Statista (Image 1), the global market value of influencer marketing was 21.1 billion US dollars in 2023, more than tripling compared to

2019. Influencers promote products and services for every industry and are eager to partner with companies. As influencer marketing continues to evolve as an industry, collaboration between brands and creators is becoming more profitable than ever.

Marketers see the main role of influencers in their audience. Influencer audiences provide value to marketers by offering organic reach, specific targeting, and increased attention. Brands leverage the power of sponsoring influencers to promote their content on their behalf to reach more and more of their target audience. Effective influencer collaborations will usually have a niche audience that is likely to have targeted appeal to maximize content engagement.

An influencer is a respected figure on social media who is compensated by companies, either monetarily or through free products, services, trips, and so on. Influencers are not only famous personalities but also individuals from various walks of life, who have many followers and whose recommendations are trusted. They create content to promote the products or services of the brand they collaborate with. Influencers almost always work on social media. They use platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitch, LinkedIn and others. The primary role of influencers is to influence consumer behavior.

The task of influencers is to build a relationship with the audience by sharing their daily life, knowledge, and information and talking to other users on social networks. With significant follower bases, influencers can act as effective marketing agents, consistently posting valuable content on social media in support of the brand (Campbell and Farell, 2020).

Today, many influencers are present on the market thanks to the effective results of influencer marketing, as well as the increased number of social network users who want to cooperate with brands for promotion, receiving compensation, or free products and services in return (Govindan and Alotaibi, 2021).

Influencers are often divided into bloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers, TikTokers, celebrities, influencers, gaming influencers, and virtual or AI influencers. According to the number of followers, they are classified as (Campbell and Farrell, 2020):

Nano Influencers – 1–10k followers.

Micro-Influencers – 10–100k followers.

Macro Influencers – 100k–1 million followers.

Mega Influencers – 1 million+ followers.

Influencers choose platforms based on their number of followers and the industry of the products or services they promote. Influencer marketing has become an essential digital marketing strategy component for marketing and profit production. Industry data shows an upsurge in the use of influencer agencies.

1. AI AND INFLUENCERS

With the digital revolution comes the expansion of new technologies, primarily AI technology. It is safe to say that AI has entered every aspect of life and is everywhere around us. Consequently, the rise of AI tools and AI influencers is unsurprising.

According to the HubSpot report (2024) *"The 2024 State of Marketing & Trends Report: Data from 1400+ Global Marketers"* (Image 2), brands have readily welcomed new technologies, and are now trying new media formats using AI tools. The report further states that 85% of marketers say generative AI has changed how they will create content in 2024 and 63% predict that most content in 2024 will be created at least in part with the help of generative AI (Hubspot, 2023).

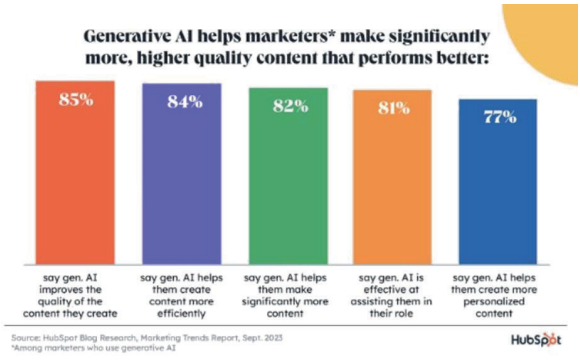
Generative AI helps marketers* make significantly more, higher quality content that performs better:
85%
84%
82%
81%
77%
say gen. AI improves the quality of the content they create
say gen. AI helps them create content more efficiently
say gen. AI helps them make significantly more content
say gen. AI is effective at assisting them in their role
say gen. AI helps them create more personalized content
Source: HubSpot Blog Research, Marketing Trends Report, Sept. 2023
*Among marketers who use generative AI
HubSpot

Image 2: https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/hubspot-blog-marketing-industry-trends-report

Most people are already familiar with AI chatbots and image generators, which use them to create convincing images and text at incredible speed. Tools such as GPT-4, DALL-E 2, and Mid-journey Stable Diffusion have the potential to drastically change how advertisers reach and engage with customers. The potential applications of these powerful tools signal a new era in the marketing and advertising industries, providing unprecedented chances for growth and optimization (Yoo and Piscarac, 2023). This is the great power of generative AI or genAI: it uses algorithms to generate new content – writing, images, or audio – from training data. The application of genAI in marketing is multifaceted: from marketing strategies, through the analysis of consumer behavior to sending personalized messages, feedback and the like, which results in higher engagement and conversion rates (Deveau et al., 2023).

According to HubSpot's report, social media are becoming the most popular channels, and short video formats such as TikTok, YouTube shorts, and Instagram Reels dominate the use of AI tools. The most common content that uses generative AI includes social media posts, emails, blogs, topic ideas, images, and product descriptions. Using AI tools in influencer marketing does not mean that the tools will do all the work for them. With the help of ChatGPT, influencers produce content that is consistent with the voice of the brand they represent more easily. ChatGPT helps influencers determine the best time to post so that their post has greater visibility and engagement (Saini et al., 2024).

In addition to using generative AI to create content, influencers also use AI tools such as Synesthesia or DeepBrain to edit video content quickly and easily. They also use AI tools to respond to emails and messages to help with carrying out engagement activities. The DreamGF platform digitizes influencers and creates AI versions of them that can chat as if they were real people. Generative AI has many applications in assisting with the day-to-day work of an influencer (Marr, 2023). The number of AI tools is increasing daily, thus their use and testing by influencers.

While influencers use their authenticity and creativity to engage their audience, AI tools enhance their performance and engagement. On the other hand, the emergence of AI influencers, such as virtual influencers, brings new dimensions and challenges to digital marketing. AI-generated influencers, or virtual influencers, are on the rise in digital marketing. They are designed to look and act like real people, and have personality traits. They provide brands with more control and authority over sponsored content and are a more cost-effective alternative to social media influencers (Deveau et al., 2023). The key benefit for corporations adopting AI influencers is increased control over branding and messaging based on firm preferences. AI influencers are more effective in engaging clients since they can conduct meaningful discussions and learn from each interaction through AI assessment of behavior and reactions to various variants (Gerlich, 2023).

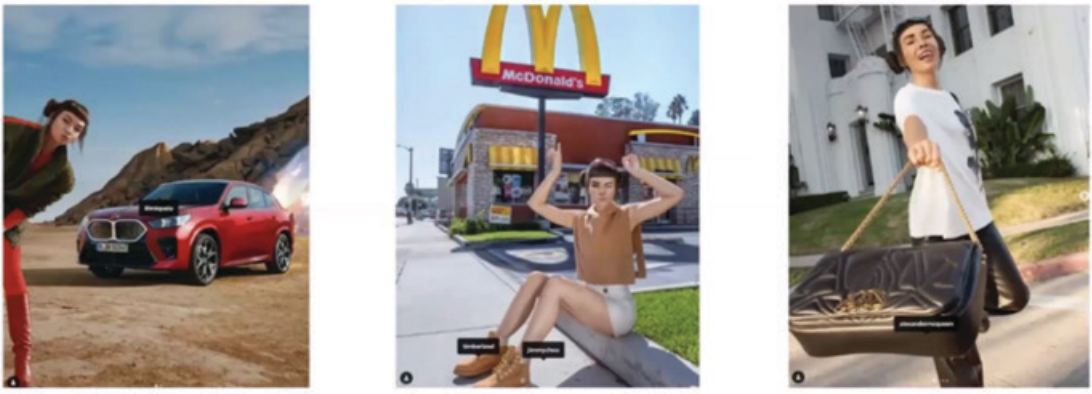

Image 3: AI-Generated Avatar Influencers (Conversation, 2023). https://theconversation.com/virtual-influencers-meet-the-ai-generated-figures-posing-as-your-new-online-friends-as-they-try-to-sell-you-stuff-212001

The first AI creator, Lil Miquela, was created in 2016 by the startup Brud (Image 3). Miquela, a computer-generated 19-year-old female, has 2.6 million

Instagram followers and has partnered with some of the largest brands, including Prada, Calvin Klein, BMW, and Samsung. Miquela is also a recognized Spotify creator, having produced a collection of her music and appeared in music videos. After breaking up with the Kardashians, the French brand Balmain created three AI influencers: Shuda, Margot, and Ji, who, according to their statement, were a better reflection of the brand's inclusion. Global brands, including KFC, LVMH, Mini, Netflix, Nike, and Samsung, have partnered with AI influencers (Sands et al., 2022).

According to the Influencer Marketing Hub Report, the results of a survey conducted on more than 3,000 marketing agencies, brands, and other relevant professionals about the current state of influencer marketing asked respondents if they plan to use artificial intelligence and ML over the next year to identify influencers or create effective campaigns. A very substantial 63% of respondents said they would, along with 27.1% who thought they would. Only 9.9% gave an unequivocal no to this question. More than 60% of respondents have used virtual influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

Data from HubSpot's survey of 1,460 B2B and B2C marketers worldwide to reveal the top marketing trends in 2024 says that with image generators, content generators, and video generators, among other tools, AI is driving major growth in the marketing industry. It is quickly becoming the top marketing assistant, with 64% of marketers already using it and 38% planning to start in 2004. Furthermore, 60% of respondents are concerned that AI could harm their brand's reputation through bias, plagiarism, or misalignment with brand values. AI tools are also aware of these problems and are already introducing possibilities for checking data and sources, for example, Google's Gemini (Hubspot, 2024).

2. RISKS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing has become an essential digital marketing strategy for marketing and profit generation. Nonetheless, influencer marketing isn't without risk. If clear instructions are not set for influencers, brands risk the campaign

losing its meaning. Additionally, careful selection of influencers is extremely important due to the risk of close and negative associations with individuals prone to personal indiscretions or scandals (Campbell et al., 2020). There are numerous examples of failed influencer marketing campaigns.

Perhaps one of the most famous is the example of the luxurious music Fyre Festival, which was conceived to be held in the Bahamas in 2017. The organizers hired hundreds of influencers, including celebrities like Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid, and Emily Ratajkowski, to promote the event on social media creating a huge hype and attracting thousands of attendees. Attracted by the influencer's posts, attendees paid thousands of dollars for tickets and accommodation, promised white sand, luxury lodgings, and first-class food. However, visitors found themselves in the mud and under tents, without the security of the organization and with the canceled festival. This resulted in lawsuits and the main organizer being fined. Netflix made a documentary *FYRE: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* (2019). It turned out that the influencers who were raising the hype for the festival didn't even come to it. Thanks to the influencers, the tickets were sold, but they lacked transparency and ethics (Faster capital). Influencers also faced backlash from their followers and the public, who accused them of misleading them and being irresponsible.

Brands that opt for mega-influencers must also be aware of the risk of unpredictable reactions and personality traits of influencers. For example, shareholders of Tiger Woods's sponsors lost between $5 and $12 million following revelations of his infidelity and his arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Another risk is the huge focus on metrics, so influencers often pay bots to increase their number of followers or views.

Another potential danger is the discrimination of influencers. According to the Influencer Marketing Hub survey, 58.3% stated they had been discriminated against, most often regarding their gender, particularly on TikTok. Discrimination was felt by both macro and micro-influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023).

AI influencers behave similarly to real ones. They are considered more ethical than traditional influencers due to their involvement in socially significant

issues and socially responsible behavior. Caution should be exercised because of the possible disadvantages of blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, which can negatively affect consumers (Laszkiewicz, 2024).

A potential risk is also the appearance of an influential person. Virtual influencers have gender, skin color, language, and age, which affect their perception. In this context, brands should consider how much their brand image depends on the correct selection of virtual influencers that should influence people's perceptions (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023:43).

If they have many followers, they are sure to attract the attention of companies with their popularity. However, questions arise regarding intellectual property, ethics, etc., and lack of authenticity, for example, how can influencers promote a product if they are unable to touch or use it? To ensure endorsements are not based solely on mimicking trends, both influencers and brands should find a way to deal with inauthentic endorsements to run a successful campaign (Kádeková and Holienčinová, 2018).

For companies to successfully master digital marketing based on artificial intelligence, they will need to consider legal and ethical considerations and ensure a safe and reliable environment for consumers (Yoo and Piscarac, 2023).

Another brand risk is the cancel culture. Cancel culture was born out of social media activism (Dotson and Ashloch, 2023) and can be described as a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money (Clark 2020, 85). Cancel culture has heavily influenced consumer-brand relationships in recent years (Pušić and Vojvodić, 2021:228), and the usual targets are brands and celebrities (Pušić and Vojvodić, 2021:232).

One example is the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga, which in 2022 released its new holiday campaign featuring children posing in their bedrooms next to the brand's products lined up like toys. After a few days of quiet public backlash, the campaign began to draw angry criticism over images of children with teddy bears inspired by the S&M brand, raising accusations and comments

that Balenciaga was sexualizing children. Creative director, Demna Gvasalia, linked Balenciaga to social media with a strong digital strategy, thus approaching Generation Z to the brand (Gárgoles and Ambás, 2023). The social media flooded with hashtags #cancelbalenciaga and #boycottbalenciaga with millions of views. Celebrities and influencers also called out Balenciaga for the ad. This example illustrates how social media impacted the brand and its misstep.

According to Statista (Image 4), with millions of internet users scouring social media platforms daily for entertainment, inspiration, and product recommendations, it is no surprise that brands are harnessing the power of social media's most recognizable faces for promotion. As of April 2024, there were 5.44 billion internet users worldwide, which amounted to 67.1% of the global population. Of this total, 5.07 billion, or 62.6% of the world's population, were social media users. These users inevitably look up to social media influencers to guide their decision-making. In addition to the influencer's credibility, creating content that is valuable to the audience is an important factor in gaining favor. Thus, the content should be useful in helping users make purchasing decisions. Moreover, the content that an influencer creates can be seen to help customers who are looking for information and can rely on someone they trust. Social media content is, therefore, a tool that can influence customer beliefs and purchasing behavior (Venciute et al. 2023). Given that the content produced by influencers is usually informative, entertaining, or inspirational, the expectation is that if followers find it useful, it will directly influence their purchase intent and decision.

Image 4: Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of April 2024 (in billions), available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/

3. INFLUENCERS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Many studies confirm that GenZ's awareness about the impact of their purchasing decision is geared towards sustainability-oriented brands. As the youngest generation of active consumers on the market, GenZ is constantly online, analyzing, searching for options and ideas, participating and making their experience relevant for sharing with their virtual tribe. According to Kralj and Mamula (2022), companies need to attract the attention of GenZ members without relying on standard forms of communication and promotion by gathering them with their closest friends, which is easier to organize with the food delivery and shopping apps, to replace it with something innovative that requires leaving a comfort zone. One of the primary goals of a marketing campaign is to promote the brand and convince customers to use a product or service, leading to a

purchase decision (Mamula Nikolić et al., 2023). The content that influencers generate on social networks has a significant impact on consumer behavior.

Research confirms that 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers trust the opinions of influencers more than celebrities and 40% of millennials say their favorite YouTube personality understands them better than their friends (Venciute et al., 2023).

According to a survey report conducted in 2023 by the agency Matter Communications in the American states, as many as 81% of respondents answered that they bought, selected, or intend to buy products after the recommendation of influencers or family and friends who posted about that product (Deyo, Marketing Dive, 2023).

Influencers often share information from their private lives, and members of the new generation communicate with them more directly and more often. In a way, they see them as their online friends and role models (Mamula Nikolić et al., 2022).

By building the credibility and trust of followers, influencers gain significant influence over consumer purchasing behavior. By creating authentic and relatable content, using the latest digital technology, AI tools connect them with the audience which leads to making a purchase decision. If there is a lack of trust in influencers who do not instill confidence, the consumer will not buy the product or service.

Statista shows data from 2023, where the highest level of trust in brand and product recommendations from social media influencers was evident among Gen Z and millennials, with one-third of respondents from each generational cohort expressing complete trust. However, over 40% of baby boomers showed no confidence in influencer endorsements at all, nearly double the skepticism of Gen X and more than four times the skepticism of Gen Z (Statista, 2023). Research conducted by Sprout Social shows that 46% of Gen Z respondents expressed increased interest in brands collaborating with AI-generated influencers (Sprout Social, 2024).

Millennials helped shape the world of influencers by pioneering the concept of influencer marketing (Singer et al., 2023). GenY's proficiency in using almost

all digital devices has led to them buying mostly online from brands they trust, have read good reviews on the internet, and are well informed about products and services. They pay special attention to the impact that brands have on the environment. They also take care of personal data protection. According to the same Statista report, as of March 2023, nearly half of millennials worldwide found endorsements from influencers about a brand or product more attractive than regular advertisements. For 36% of respondents, influencer recommendations were also considered more reliable than average ads (Statista, 2023).

With the constant growth and expansion of influencer marketing comes a new trend in influencer marketing. The impact of artificial intelligence is reflected in the increasing use of artificial intelligence tools by brands. Brands use it mainly to choose the most suitable person for an influencer campaign and to track the campaign's success (Liu, 2021). Recently, companies have created AI-Generated Avatar Influencers with great success. Virtual influencers have clear benefits when it comes to online engagement and marketing. They don't age, they're free from (real) scandals and they can be programmed to speak any language. It's no surprise a number of companies and celebrities have caught onto the trend.

A new trend of de-influencing was created on TikTok in 2023 due to fake promotions by influencers to encourage brands and influencers to use more honest advertising. De-influencers offer often better and more honest alternatives to the reviewed products (Plazibat and Marunica, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In the paper, we investigated the role of influencers in the era of AI expansion and the digital revolution on consumer behavior. The findings reveal that in the era of digital transformation, there is an integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Influencers play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior. Influencers are keeping pace with the expansion of AI, using AI tools, and have become essential in modern marketing strategies, especially on social

media platforms. Consumer reliance on influencer recommendations was also accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the trend toward online shopping. Artificial intelligence technologies improve the effectiveness of influencers by providing personalized content and data-driven insights, resulting in higher engagement and conversion rates. We also found that the degree of trust in influencers is very important. This research highlights the high level of trust in influencers among Gen Z and Millennials, who are more likely to be influenced by social media personalities, while Gen X remains more cautious.

A new chapter in influencer marketing is the emergence of virtual influencers. They offer brands greater control over messaging and can engage with audiences in innovative ways. Examining recent trends, research shows that virtual influencers are preferred over human influencers and are considered equally trustworthy, yet they also bring new challenges that need addressing. Brands must adapt and innovate in a rapidly changing environment as digital technologies and artificial intelligence continue to evolve, and their impact on consumer behavior and marketing strategies will undoubtedly grow. Marketing professionals should prioritize identifying suitable influencers and use them to identify target audiences whose communications would be relevant to drive brand engagement. Additionally, consideration should be given to identifying the most effective strategies, opportunities, challenges, platforms, and content that content marketers will soon be using.

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